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Fathoming secrets —a layman's guide



WASHINGTON—Former CIA Director William E. Colby likes to use an ancient Hindu fable to describe the problems laymen have in grasping the true nature of intelligence work.

The fable dwells on the difficulties six blind men had in describing an elephant after they examined its components under their handicap.

One felt the beast's sturdy side and pronounced it to be a wall. Another encountered a tusk and decided the pachyderm was indeed a spear. A third thumped its trunk and became con-



Colby: Citing the progress

vinced the elephant was a snake. And so on.

"In short, the toughest problem stems from the nature of the beast," Colby told us in an interview during his last day in office as he closed out a 30-year intelligence career.

"INTELLIGENCE WORK has always been secret. Now, we have had the first serious investigation of the intelligence community by Congress.

"And the question is if the investigation will give you the total outline of the elephant or if it will be selectively presented to only show one piece of the elephant focused through a screen so that you will think the whole elephant looks like that."

Colby, who twice jumped behind enemy lines in World War II to work with French resistance groups and blow up rail lines in Norway while with the Office of Strategic Services, said he had hoped congressional inquiries would present a balanced portrait of CIA operations.

"I hoped they would demonstrate our mistakes of the past 28 years, but also bring out that we had taken corrective actions through a series of directives in 1973," Colby told us. Incidentally, that was the year Colby became the CIA director.

"I also hoped the investigations would describe what intelligence work is all about," he continued. "Unfortunately, the sensational qualities of our work is

what some of the press and Congress picked up on."

For example, Colby cited news photos of Sen. Frank Church, the Democratic presidential aspirant from Idaho who served as Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, holding a dart gun designed by CIA weapons technicians.

"The gun was never used," Colby declared. "Yet, that was the end result of a six-month investigation. The same applies to all the tales of assassination plots. There were actually only two targets and nobody died."

"Take the stories of allegedly massive domestic intelligence by the CIA. The Rockefeller Commission conducted a four-month investigation. And it found that most of the things we did were perfectly proper."

"Some of the things we did because the President told us to. There was a questionable gray area. And some of the things we did we should not have done."

"We shouldn't have opened mail. But remember, that program was started in 1953 in the midst of the Cold War, when Russia was a clearly defined threat and we monitored mail to and from the Soviet Union."

"Those things have been sensationalized and they have obscured the real nature of American intelligence. It is the best in the world. It operates under the law and the Constitution. It has revolutionized the profession of intelligence by utilizing openly and clandestinely acquired information."

"Our superior technology has changed the whole frame of reference. We used to estimate the number of missiles the Russians might have. Today, we count them and measure them by technical means — an eye in the sky [satellites], photography, and electronics."

"And we have devised new ways to analyze the information, to make it more methodical and precise."

"So that is the reality. Not the dart gun. Not the assassination plots."

"The CIA does have a job of conducting secret, even paramilitary operations abroad. We do very little of this. Only about 5 per cent of the CIA budget is devoted to this."

"In the 1950s and 1960s, the figure was much higher. In the early 1950s, such operations accounted for over 50 per cent of the budget, a reflection of the times and the threats we faced."

"But don't get the wrong impression. These are primarily just giving help to some group in some country that wants to act in our best interests and against the Soviet Union."

"NOW, WE ARE faced with the Soviets pushing again. We have problems they do not have. Our problem is to get information. The Soviet problem is to understand information."

"We have to get what is kept secret from us. They get so much information they must separate the wheat from the chaff. A person is foolish to spy on America. You can read most of it in the newspapers."

"I wish I could read as freely in the papers about the military posture statement and appropriations of Soviet Defense Minister Andrei Grechko as he does of ours."

"That is a fact of life in an open society. The information is available for the asking here. It is not in Soviet Russia."